



Focus on 2005 Drought Emergency

from Ecology's Water Resources Program

Drought-emergency declaration

On March 10, 2005, Governor Christine Gregoire authorized the Department of Ecology (Ecology) to declare a statewide drought emergency. Ecology Director, Jay Manning, declared that a statewide drought emergency is now in effect. Under Washington state law, the governor authorizes Ecology to declare a drought emergency when two circumstances exist:

1. **Low water supplies** – When expected water supplies from lakes and streams are below 75 percent of normal (75% below normal means that according to snow-pack measurements, 25% less water is anticipated in streams this year), and
2. **Undue hardships** – The water shortage would cause an undue hardship to people and the environment. Hardships can include crop failures, shortages of municipal water and barriers for fish passage.

The declaration of drought activates an emergency response by Ecology and other state agencies to help communities, businesses and farmers that will be affected by the drought.

Ecology's drought-emergency response

By state law, when a drought emergency is declared, Ecology has several tools for responding to the drought:

- Authorize temporary transfers of water rights to help redistribute water to more critical uses.
- Permit previously-drilled emergency wells to be used.
- Permit new emergency wells to be drilled or allow the use of alternate sources of water.
- Issue temporary water permits to expand capacity on existing wells.
- Purchase and lease water rights from willing sellers.

Emergency water permits. The permits would allow cities, businesses and farmers to withdraw water from the ground, a lake or stream to replace water that is not available due to the drought. Before Ecology can grant an emergency water permit, the department must be satisfied that water is available, that senior water rights would not be impaired, and the water would be put to full beneficial use.

Transfer of water rights. People with existing water rights may apply for temporary changes to those rights to help reduce the effects of the drought. A transfer (i.e., changing the source of the water, where it is used, or how it is used) of a water right might involve transferring a water right from one farmer to another or from one city to another.

Transferring water rights provides a great way for neighbors to help other neighbors survive the drought. Ecology encourages people to talk with their neighbors about who needs water and who might have some extra water to share. Ecology will help match people who are at risk of having little or no water with others who have more water than they absolutely need. A water-right holder also might choose to transfer his or her water into state trust and let the water stay in a stream to help fish survive.

Ecology will be able to make decisions about water transfers within 15 days after receiving an application because state law waives requirements for public notification and other environmental review during a drought emergency.

Financial assistance. As of March 2005, Ecology had about \$1.8 million available to pay for drought-response activities. The legislature and governor may approve additional funding during the 2005 legislative session.



Compliance with water-use laws

In a drought year, it is especially important that people not use water that they are not entitled to. In some areas of the state, there are court orders in place that require Ecology to actively look for signs of illegal water use and report it to a judge for further follow-up. In other parts of the state, Ecology will first work to make sure people know the law, know how much water they are entitled to, and know how to find answers to their questions. When technical assistance doesn't work, then Ecology may have to take formal enforcement actions.

Facts about the 2005 drought

Washington state is expected to have one of the driest summers on record. The National Weather Service reported that in some areas of the state, this winter already has been the driest ever in the state. Precipitation and snow-pack levels put this year among the five driest winters ever recorded.

March stream-flow forecasts predict that most of the watersheds in Washington will have between 22 and 50 percent of normal water supplies, assuming normal precipitation for the remainder of the year. This clearly falls well below the 75 percent threshold for declaring a drought.

Everyone in Washington is directly or indirectly affected by a drought. A drought can result in farms and manufacturing plant workers losing their jobs and farmers not being able to plant crops. A drought can also spell disaster for recreational companies that use water (e.g., swimming pool providers, water parks and river rafting companies). This can also affect landscaping and nursery businesses if people are concerned about not being able to water their plants.

What you can do

All citizens can help lessen the effects of the limited water supplies by conserving water. People can use water more efficiently in their homes, businesses and yards.

For conservation information and links to other sites that offer useful tips on ways your business or household can save water, or general information on drought, please visit our Web page at:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/wrhome.html>

Contacts

For regional information about drought:

Northwest Region, Bellevue: 425-649-7000

Southwest Region, Lacey: 360-407-6300

Central Region, Yakima: 509-575-2490

Eastern Region, Spokane: 509-329-3400

Ecology's media contact on drought:

Curt Hart, (360) 407-7139; pager, (360) 971-9610

If you require this document in an alternate format, please contact the Water Resources Program at (360) 407-6600 or TTY (for the speech or hearing impaired) at 711 or 800-833-6388.